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ABSTRACT

This report examines 10 years of data analyzing the effectiveness of correctional boot camps in reducing the likelihood that inmates will commit another crime after release from prison and reducing prison populations and costs. Each boot camp studied had a different design, and each study used a different method to evaluate the program. Results indicated that participants reported positive short-term changes in attitudes and behaviors and had better problem solving and coping skills. With few exceptions, however, these positive changes did not lead to reduced recidivism. The boot camps that did produce lower recidivism rates offered more treatment services, had longer sessions, and included more intensive post-release supervision. However, not all programs with these features had successful results. Results suggest that under a narrow set of conditions, boot camps can lead to small relative reductions in prison population and correctional costs. Reasons for failure included: mandates to reduce prison populations through early release made volunteering for boot camps unnecessary as a means of shortening sentences; lack of a standard boot camp model; and insufficient focus on offenders' reentry into the community. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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Research for Practice

Correctional Boot Camps: Lessons From a Decade of Research

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Correctional Boot Camps: Lessons From a Decade of Research

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Can a program designed to improve an inmate's attitudes and behaviors reduce the likelihood that he or she will commit another crime after release from prison? Could such a program reduce prison populations and costs? This Research for Practice reports on 10 years of data analyzing the success or failure of correctional boot camps to meet these goals.

What did the researchers find?

The studies of boot camps produced mixed results:

- Participants reported positive short-term changes in attitudes and behaviors; they also had better problem-solving and coping skills.
- With few exceptions, these positive changes did not lead to reduced recidivism. The boot camps that did produce lower recidivism rates offered more treatment services, had longer sessions, and included more intensive postrelease supervision. However, not all programs with these features had successful results.
- Under a narrow set of conditions, boot camps can lead to small relative reductions in prison populations and correctional costs.

What were the study's limitations?

The author reviewed and compiled data from studies of boot camps published over a period of 10 years. Each boot camp studied had a different design. This lack of uniformity made it difficult to assess what components were and were not successful. Also, each study used a different method to evaluate the program, which made comparing their findings difficult.

Who should read this study?

Correctional administrators at adult and juvenile facilities and State and local policymakers.

Dale G. Parent

Correctional Boot Camps: Lessons From a Decade of Research

In response to rising rates of serious crime, many correctional systems established boot camps as an alternative sanction that might reduce recidivism, prison populations, and operating costs. Despite a decade of popularity with policymakers and the public, boot camps have had difficulty meeting these objectives.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored an analysis of research conducted over a 10-year period beginning in the late 1980s. This analysis concluded that—

- Boot camps generally had positive effects on the attitudes, perceptions, behavior, and skills of inmates during their confinement.
- With limited exceptions, these positive changes did not translate into reduced recidivism.
- Boot camps can achieve small *relative* reductions in prison populations and modest reductions in correctional costs under a narrow set of conditions (admitting offenders with a high likelihood of otherwise serving a conventional prison term and offering discounts in time served to those who complete boot camps).

The surveyed research identified three factors largely responsible for the failure of boot camps to reach goals related to prison population and recidivism:

- Mandates to reduce prison populations through early release made volunteering for boot camps unnecessary as a means of shortening sentences.
- Lack of a standard boot camp model.
- Insufficient focus on offenders' reentry into the community.

The camps' disciplined structure and therapeutic programs eliminated idleness and created a safer environment, which in turn improved inmate attitudes and behavior. Such structure, coupled with a therapeutic orientation, may apply to other correctional programs, especially

About the Author

Between 1988 and 1997, Dale G. Parent, a Senior Associate at Abt Associates Inc., conducted studies of correctional boot camps for the National Institute of Justice.

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those that target youthful offenders.

Why boot camps?

As the name implies, correctional boot camps are in-prison programs that resemble military basic training. They emphasize vigorous physical activity, drill and ceremony, manual labor, and other activities that ensure that participants have little, if any, free time. Strict rules govern all aspects of conduct and appearance. Correctional officers act as drill instructors, initially using intense verbal tactics designed to break down inmates' resistance and lead to constructive changes.

Three generations of camps. Boot camps proliferated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By 1995, State correctional agencies operated 75 boot camps for adults, State and local agencies operated 30 juvenile boot camps, and larger counties operated 18 boot camps in local jails.[1]

The camps evolved over time. Early research findings shaped subsequent boot camp policies and the design and operation of new programs.

Although first-generation camps stressed military discipline, physical training, and hard work, second-generation camps emphasized rehabilitation by adding such components as alcohol and drug treatment and prosocial skills training. Some also added intensive postrelease supervision that may include electronic monitoring, home confinement, and random urine tests. A few camps admitted females, but this proved somewhat controversial (see "Females in Boot Camps"). Recently, some boot camps, particularly those for juveniles, have substituted an emphasis on educational and vocational skills for the military components to provide comparable structure and discipline.[2]

After the mid-1990s, the number of boot camps declined. By 2000, nearly one-third of State prison boot camps had closed—only 51 camps remained. The average daily population in State boot camps also dropped more than 30 percent.[3]

Boot camps' goals. Boot camps had three main goals: reducing recidivism, reducing prison populations, and reducing costs.

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Females in Boot Camps

Some boot camp programs began accepting eligible female inmates in the early 1990s, but concerns soon emerged about whether the boot camp strategy is appropriate for women.

Findings from the limited research on female boot camp participants and their high dropout rate clearly indicate that this population faces unique problems. A 1992 study[a] noted that the programs were designed for males and did not accommodate women's special needs or problems.

- **Female inmates are more likely to have children and be the sole parent for those children.** Boot camps often restricted, or even banned, visitation, creating difficult situations for mothers and their children. Also, the programs did not teach parenting skills.
- **Female inmates are more likely to have a history of physical or sexual abuse.** Although female inmates were four to five times more likely than male inmates to have been victims of physical or sexual abuse, most camps had no programs to help them cope with or avoid victimization. Derogatory boot camp tactics tended to retraumatize domestic violence victims.
- **Female inmates are more likely to have a different history and pattern of drug use than males.** Most substance abuse treatment used therapies designed for males.
- **Female inmates are more likely to have been unemployed before imprisonment.** Boot camps did little to prepare women for employment after release.

Female inmates at boot camps reported high stress levels, which may be why they tended to drop out of boot camp at a higher rate than male inmates. Stress stemmed from a physical training regimen designed for males; drill instructors' "in your face" tactics; lack of other female participants, often leading to isolation within the camp; and cross-gender supervision.

A 1998 study[b] described features of successful prison programs for females, most of which were absent from boot camps. These features include the following:

- Using women staff members as role models.
- Addressing participants' prior victimization by building self-esteem and emphasizing empowerment and self-sufficiency.
- Using nonaggressive program management styles.

Notes

a. MacKenzie et al. 1996.

b. Morash, Bynum, and Koons 1998.

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Camps were expected to reduce recidivism by changing inmates' attitudes, values, and behaviors and by addressing factors that increase the likelihood of returning to prison (such as lack of job skills, addiction, and inability to control anger). Camps were expected to reduce prison populations by shortening time served. Reduced length of stay was expected to reduce costs.

Reducing recidivism—an unmet goal

NIJ evaluation studies consistently showed that boot camps did not reduce recidivism regardless of whether the camps were for adults or juveniles or whether they were first-generation programs with a heavy military emphasis or later programs with more emphasis on treatment. Most of the research suggested that the limitations of boot camps prevented them from reducing recidivism or prison populations, even as they achieved other goals. These limitations mostly resulted from—

- ***Low "dosage" effects.*** The length of stay in boot camps—usually from 90 to 120 days—was too brief to realistically affect recidivism.
- ***Insufficient preparation of boot camp inmates for reentry into the community.*** Many boot camps provided little or no postrelease programming to prepare graduates to lead productive lives. In addition, the intensive supervision common to later generations of boot camps meant heightened surveillance levels for boot camp graduates. These factors combined to magnify the high rates of return for technical parole violations.
- ***Conflicting or unrealistic goals or mandates set by State legislatures.*** For example, most boot camp programs sought to reduce prison populations. Shorter programs more effectively meet this goal, but they also lower dosage effects and reduce the likelihood that treatment programs will work, thereby potentially increasing recidivism.
- ***The absence of a strong underlying treatment model.*** Pragmatism and local politics often affected boot camp structure more than theory and research results. In fact, this lack of consistent design and approach made controlled scientific analysis difficult (see "Researching the

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RESEARCHING THE RESEARCH: A THUMBNAIL REVIEW

The author reviewed boot camp studies to determine the effects of these camps on participants and whether their goals were achieved or even achievable. The first published boot camp study (1989) informed practitioners about existing programs and called for rigorous evaluations.[4] Subsequent research included—

- A multisite evaluation of boot camps in several States.[5]
- Studies of camps receiving funds under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.[6]
- A multisite process and evaluation study of three juvenile boot camps.[7]
- Evaluations funded by State and local governments.[8]

Although study findings were remarkably consistent, some of the methods of deriving results and conclusions illustrate the difficulties in researching phenomena as complex as correctional boot camps.

Designing for the Differences

Most evaluations compared boot camp graduates with non-boot camp correctional inmates. One problem with this approach was that differences could have stemmed from differences among members of the two groups, rather than from boot camp effects. Researchers tried to match group members on important variables and to control statistically for known differences. A few evaluations used random assignment of eligible subjects, lowering the possibility of differences among groups.

Estimating Elusive Cost Savings

Most studies that examined boot camps' cost impact multiplied the estimated charges attributed to the boot camp in person-days of confinement by the average operating costs for each person-day of confinement. However, this approach may overstate cost savings because staffing costs will not vary unless changes in confinement person-days are large enough to allow the actual closing of facilities. Small population reductions avert marginal costs only. Moreover, States vary in how they determine costs, making comparisons across States problematic.

Counting Hypothetically Empty Beds

Some findings about boot camps, especially those involving the impact on prison populations, are hypothetical because they are derived from simulations and calculations based on projections, rather than on actual results.

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Researching the Research (continued)

For example, a key element used to determine boot camp impact on required prison bed space was the probability that boot camp entrants would have been imprisoned if the boot camp did not exist. Modeling in one study showed that the probability of imprisonment for boot camp entrants would have to be very high to reach a "break-even" point of overall prison population.[f] If the probability of imprisonment for boot camp entrants were not high enough, the camp's existence would actually *increase* prison population.

For the probability of imprisonment factor to fall below a break-even (thereby hypothetically reducing the prison population), correctional officials needed to select offenders who were *already sentenced.* If judges selected boot camp participants before sentencing, this would not reduce the prison population according to these calculations.

Untangling Findings and Results

Many studies had ambiguous findings. Although NIJ's multisite evaluation[a] found no difference overall in recidivism between boot camp graduates and the comparison groups, three of the eight sites may have had lower recidivism. These sites had better treatment services, longer program duration, and more intensive postrelease supervision.

However, some of the other five boot camps also had these components, and the apparent reason for lower recidivism in two of the three sites was different from the third. Evaluators admitted they could not "untangle the particular effects of each program component on recidivism."[h] Focusing on what they could prove, they concluded that "the core elements of boot camp programs—military-style discipline, hard labor, and physical training—by themselves did not reduce offender recidivism." Finally, they speculated that for programs to affect recidivism, "it is likely that some mixture of rehabilitation and intensive followup supervision plays an important role."[i]

Notes

a. See Parent 1989.

b. See MacKenzie and Souryal 1994.

c. Parent et al. 1999; Zhang 1999; MacKenzie et al. 2001; Lewis et al. 1998; Austin 2000.

d. Peters et al. 1997.

e. Flowers et al. 1991.

f. Parent 1994.

g. MacKenzie and Souryal 1994; MacKenzie et al.1995.

h. MacKenzie and Hebert 1996, p. 293.

i. Ibid.

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Research: A Thumbnail Review").

Adult recidivism. A multisite evaluation sponsored by NIJ could not establish a difference in recidivism between adult boot camp graduates and comparison group members, although the research indicated that more treatment services, longer programs, and intensive postrelease supervision may lower recidivism.[4]

Other research on adult boot camps in Georgia and Illinois found no difference in recidivism.[5] An evaluation of Washington's Work Ethic Camp[6] (WEC) actually found higher recidivism, from high rates of revoked parole. Most of these were technical violations.[7] One study found that Oregon adult boot camp graduates had significantly lower recidivism than the comparison group, but results were flawed because camp dropouts were excluded from the analysis.[8]

Juvenile recidivism. Results from juvenile boot camp studies are similar: Random-assignment evaluations in California and Indiana and a multisite evaluation sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found no significant differences in recidivism rates between boot camp participants and comparison groups. In some cases, boot camp graduates had higher rates of recidivism.[9]

Improving behavior—a success story

Boot camps were almost universally successful in improving inmates' attitudes and behavior during the course of the program; they also produced safer environments for staff and residents, presumably due to their highly structured atmosphere and activities.

Several studies indicated that adult boot camp participants had better attitudes about their confinement experiences and had improved their prosocial attitudes more than comparison group members.[10] One study concluded that inmates in adult boot camps had increased self-esteem, reduced antisocial attitudes, increased problem-solving skills, improved coping skills, and improved social support.[11] In other studies, boot camp inmates improved their self-esteem and standardized education scores in reading and math more than comparison group members.[12]

Anxiety and depression declined to a greater degree

among juveniles in boot camps than among those in comparison facilities.[13] Dysfunctional impulsivity (the inability to control one's impulses) increased among youths in comparison facilities but decreased among boot camp participants. Social attitudes improved among youths in boot camps, but worsened among those in comparison facilities.

Reducing prison population—mixed results

NIJ-sponsored boot camp researchers agree that correctional boot camps might achieve small *relative*[14] reductions in prison populations. Boot camps could reduce the number of prison beds needed in a jurisdiction, which would lead to modest reductions in correctional costs.

NIJ's multisite study[15] concluded that adult boot camp programs in Louisiana and New York reduced their need for prison beds. Two other studies[16] found that WEC and an Illinois camp reduced prison bed-space requirements.[17] Researchers also concluded that juvenile boot camps reduced the needed number of correctional beds in South Dakota and Oregon.[18]

However, restrictive entry criteria for boot camp participants often made it impossible to reduce prison populations. For example, some jurisdictions required that boot camp inmates be nonviolent offenders convicted of their first felony. This small pool of eligible candidates typically serves short prison terms before parole. These inmates had little incentive to volunteer for boot camps that would not shorten their terms. When inmates sentenced to longer prison terms were recruited, however, a reduction in time served became a compelling incentive.

Efforts to meet the recidivism goal may work against meeting population and cost reduction goals. For example, lengthening a boot camp term to add more treatment programs in order to reduce the chances of recidivism would shorten the discount in time served and, thus, not reduce the population or prison bed costs.[19]

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Conclusions

Correctional practitioners and planners might learn from boot camps' failure to reduce recidivism or prison populations by considering the following:

- Building reintegration into the community into an inmate's individual program and reentry plans may improve the likelihood he or she will not commit a new offense.
- Programs that offered substantial discounts in time served to those who completed boot camps and that chose candidates sentenced to serve longer terms were the most successful in reducing prison populations.
- Chances of reducing recidivism increased when boot camp programs lasted longer and offered more intensive treatment and postrelease supervision, activities that may conflict with the goal of reducing population.

Efforts to achieve multiple goals are likely the overall cause of boot camps' conflicting results. Program designers are urged to determine which options are best for their jurisdictions; for example, they may consider whether to implement more treatment programs or move inmates out of the system more rapidly. These decisions affect costs, as prison bed-space savings go up or down.

Other correctional programs are adopting some of the important elements of boot camps—for example, carefully structured programs that reduce idleness—to increase safety and improve conditions of confinement for younger offenders.[20] However, in recent years, some jurisdictions facing rising costs have responded by cutting programs. One lesson for policymakers from 10 years of boot camp research is that curtailing programs may lead to increased violence, misconduct, and serious management problems.

Notes

1. Camp and Camp 2001a, 2001b.

2. Gransky et al. 1995.

3. Camp and Camp 2001a.

4. MacKenzie and Souryal 1994; MacKenzie et al. 1995.

5. See Flowers et al. 1991; Austin 2000.

6. See Austin 2000.

7. Prosecutors often decide against trying offenders on new crimes

because parole officials can revoke parole for technical violations. If revocations and returns for technical violations are reduced, new convictions may increase.

8. The program had a 52-percent failure rate. See Austin 2000.

9. See Bottcher and Isorena 1994; Austin 2000; Zhang 1999; Peters et al. 1997.

10. See MacKenzie and Souryal 1994.

11. See Austin 2000.

12. Clark et al. 1994; Bottcher and Isorena 1994; Peters et al. 1997.

13. MacKenzie et al. 2001.

14. Boot camps were unlikely to lower *absolute* prison population levels. The camps opened during a time when major changes in sentencing policies and practices caused prison populations to soar. Even at the height of their popularity, the total capacity of boot camps was minuscule compared to the total prison population.

15. See MacKenzie and Piquero 1994, pp. 222–249; MacKenzie and Souryal 1994. A later study of the New York network of boot camps reached the same conclusion: see Clark et al. 1994.

16. See Parent et al. 1999; Austin 2000.

17. See Austin 2000.

18. See Parent et al. 1999.

19. Ibid.

20. OJJDP's Performance-based Standards project seeks to improve conditions by establishing standards for correctional facilities and programs. More information may be found at http://www.performance-standards.org/.

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